

Main Street Matters

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LLANO

Written by Terry Tex Toler, Main Street Manager, Llano Main Street Program

Limited resources and lots of sweat equity from a small corps of volunteers are making a visible and tangible difference in the Deer Capital of Texas.

The Story Behind Llano's Surviving Architectural History: Llano's Wild West Heritage

A group of men gathered under a large oak tree on the south bank of the Llano River in 1855—not quite a block away from the current site of the 1893 Llano County Courthouse—and established the

county seat of Llano. For the next three decades, the town grew from an agriculture-based economy to an iron mining boomtown that began in 1886 and lasted about seven years.

Llano transformed from a sleepy farming and ranching hub into a bustling industrial town of 7,000-plus, with its sights set on becoming the next Pittsburgh, Detroit, or Birmingham, Alabama. The iron deposit boom attracted entrepreneurs, investors, and developers from all over the country, including some with international interests. They brought new architectural styles and building techniques, resulting in a fairly sophisticated and substantially built environment for an otherwise small and isolated frontier town.

(Cont. on page 2)



Construction of the present-day courthouse was completed in 1893 by A.O. Watson and Jacob Larmour. It was designed in a Romanesque Revival style, and it includes a foundation of granite that supports the marble and granite columns. Interior features include iron stairway treads, ornamental newels, and baulsters of wood. A clock was added to the tower at a later date. ([Source](#) and for more information on the history of the courthouse and its restoration process.)

Llano was founded on the frontier, and it really does have a wild west legacy. One of the last major battles with American Indians (Apaches had been raiding the town for years) occurred just southeast of town at Packsaddle Mountain, in 1873, when the town was not quite two decades old.

At the peak of the boom in 1892, the town was incorporated, the river was dammed and bridged, and the Austin and Northwestern Railroad was extended from Austin to a terminal on the north side of Llano. Because of the improved transportation, several granite cutting and finishing businesses moved to town in this period. Dozens of new buildings sprung up during the boom years. A large, luxury hotel and numerous impressive brick and cut rock structures were constructed around the public square on the north side of the river at the terminus of the railroad. The rail attracted passengers from the more populated parts of Texas to what was then referred to as “West Texas.” Llano was truly on the edge of the “wild west.”

The boom was short-lived though, and when the iron deposits did not live up to expectations, businesses closed, big projects ceased, and failed merchants were left with large, empty buildings. Many structures burned (perhaps not-so-mysteriously). So many that for several years afterward, insurance was denied in Llano.

Llano lost many large and handsome structures to arson. In 1900, as if to add insult to injury, a rare—if not freakish—tornado on the north side of the river destroyed several blocks of remaining structures. Blocks of commercial row buildings were leveled or damaged so severely that they were later razed.

Even after the loss of so many buildings, the many surviving historic structures in Llano are a testament to just how prolific construction had been at the height of the boom. Llano may owe its architectural heritage equally to the economic bust. Because Llano’s economy languished for so many decades, there was no need to tear down and replace old buildings. Instead, a series of businesses would come and go in the same buildings over the decades.

The population has hovered on either side of 3,000 for decades, but recently Llano is showing evidence of growth, mostly fueled by the population explosion of Austin, San Antonio, and the entire state of Texas



The Haynie Building on Llano’s Main Street and northwest corner of the courthouse square survives today. A recent new owner will add the historical bullnose tin and bracketed awning to the building. Unfortunately, the brick had been painted in the 1990s. Working with the Main Street Manager/Historic Preservation Officer, who consulted with THC team members, the recommendation is to paint the building as closely to the original brick colors as possible and remove the paint from the granite sills. The new owner is also passionate about historic preservation and wants to do as much as financially feasible to return the building to its original appearance.

itself. Several new businesses are filling once-empty storefronts, and many new B&Bs have opened in the last two years.

Llano’s National Register Designation

By 1983, the National Register of Historic Places listed several buildings as landmarks: the courthouse, the Llano County Jail, the Southern Hotel, and the Badu Building. In 1989, Llano gained official National Register Historic District designation for its downtown including the County Courthouse Square. Several structures received the Recorded Texas Historic Landmark designation, including the County Jail, the Southern Hotel building, three commercial row buildings, and two houses.

In the mid-nineties, Llano’s dedication to preservation was tested when the Texas Department of Transportation’s (TXDOT) plan to widen State Highway 71 (the main thoroughfare bordering the courthouse square) was rumored to require the demolition of two entire blocks of historic buildings and possibly the historic Roy Inks Bridge. Citizens mounted successful opposition in 1997, and by 1999, the plan was dropped.

An engineering assessment also determined the bridge was stronger and more viable than it was originally believed to be. The bridge is not only an iconic landmark of Llano, but acts as a traffic calming element into the historic square (from highway 29), and serves the essential purpose of bridging the north and south sides of town for vehicular and pedestrian traffic.

Gaining the State and National Landmark status not only saved the buildings and the bridge, it spurred a preservation and restoration boom in the little town, resulting in numerous building facades getting facelifts and historic restorations. The development of the Railyard District began with several grants helping construct a reproduction of Llano's Railroad Depot, which serves as a Visitor and Information Center and Railroad Museum. The Depot anchors a district which has seen several surrounding structures rehabilitated into the Llano County Museum, restaurants, retail, offices, antique stores, and the nearby historic Dabb's Railroad Hotel.

Llano Main Street Program Creates a Focus for the Effort

In 2002, the Llano County Courthouse restoration was completed with a grant from the Texas Historical Commission's Texas Courthouse Preservation Program. Shortly thereafter in 2003, Llano became a Texas Main Street city. Spearheaded by the first Main Street Manager, the late Sarah Franklin, several projects began restoring some of the visual appeal to the historic district's building facades that had been altered, covered, or removed over the decades.

Aided by new city-enforced codes and ordinances, Franklin and Main Street volunteers generated enthusiasm among building owners and the public for preservation and restoration efforts. A new gazebo, compatible in design to the historic courthouse, was constructed on the courthouse square on the Main Street side. With assistance and guidance from the TMSP design team, the historic commercial row of buildings on East Main Street received new awnings, paint on the trim, signage, visitor kiosk, planters, and banners. Individual building owners around town joined in the renewed spirit of revival in Llano.



Llano Main Street.

Keeping it “Real”

When this Main Street Manager inherited the program in 2014, my first task was researching Llano’s history. Adhering to the “Real Stories/Real People/Real Places” philosophy, my goal was to preserve and promote Llano’s authentic and genuine history and cultural heritage.

Llano citizens and the Chamber of Commerce did an effective job promoting their tagline, “Llano: The Way Texas Used to Be.” In fact, Llano had been named one of the top Western towns in the U.S. by True West magazine, and its Llano River Chuckwagon Cookoff was one of the top chuckwagon gatherings in the nation. Llano’s rodeo has continuously operated for nearly a century, and the county boasts more National Rodeo Champions-per-capita than anywhere in America.

This was a genuine, authentic reputation and heritage upon which to build—and promote! We decided that Llano had a unique opportunity to adhere to a truly authentic approach to our historic district improvements, based upon historical photographic documentation.

Rather than adding typical decorative and ornamental elements that never existed, we are eschewing reproduction lamp posts, uniform planters, railings, and even signage. Llano’s photographs of the boom era, when most of our surviving architecture was built, show telephone/power poles, sidewalks, and curbing of granite, limestone, and sandstone. There were no trees planted along the sidewalks and storefronts. Awnings served the purpose of pedestrian shade and shelter. In fact, Llano’s sidewalks are rather narrow, and to accommodate trees or planting insets, the awnings would have to be sacrificed.

There are some historic granite curbs around the historic district that contain the vestiges of the iron hitching posts of the 1870s through the horse drawn carriage age. Even some of the hitching rings remain in places. Eventually, we would like to recreate these wherever they once stood.

As a certified Texas Film Friendly Community by the Texas Film Commission, our hope is that if a period movie ever needs an authentic town square, Llano can appear as convincing as Granger did in the movie “True Grit.”



Research to Authenticate the Genuine

Armed with a Llano history book, *Cobwebs and Cornerstones*, co-written by the first Llano Main Street Manager Sarah Franklin and Phyllis Almond, this Main Street Manager poured over the photographs to identify surviving structures and compare what had changed. I referred to the historic structure inventory prepared by the THC in 2003, and began formulating a strategy to return as many surviving structures in the historic district to their original appearance—or as closely as possible.

First, I compiled a series

The Moore State Bank Building sat in the condition at left for years, while owners and even THC experts, pondered solutions to mitigate or mask the black adhesive stains imbedded deeply into the cut limestone façade without ruining the original Art Deco look of the building. Working with the Llano Historic Preservation Officer, the façade was repaired as closely as possible to its original look with a coating of sealer and then elastomeric paint mixed with sand to replicate the sandstone texture. The owners chose not to accept Llano Main Street’s offer to apply for a façade grant, explaining that “It’s our building, and we need to fix it on our own nickel.” Note the 1880s-era granite curbing in front of the building.

of photographs illustrating the changes in appearance throughout the decades. Approaching building owners with photographic evidence was easier than just verbal descriptions. I convinced them that by investing in restoring their building to its historic appearance, it would bring more attention to their business. The more buildings we restored, the more Llano might be able to attract an even, historic look.

These personal meetings with the building owners were also an opportunity to educate them on what they could and could not do with their structures within the National Register Historic District and Llano's own historic codes. In many cases I was able to discern their future plans for their buildings, give them an idea of what the costs of restoration would be, and introduce them to Llano Main Street's facade grant program.

It also allowed me the opportunity to explain more about the Llano Main Street Program's purpose and goals. They got to know me better and understand my motivation, and I allayed fears that some had about historical markers preventing them from using their buildings the way they see fit, or the proverbial accusation, "Are y'all going to tell me what colors I can or cannot paint my building?"

The Challenges of Limited Resources

Of course, the biggest challenge all preservation efforts encounter is funding, and small, relatively isolated Llano with a population of 3,400 continues to struggle with this hurdle. However, through some creative approaches, planning in stages, and armed mostly with a small corps of dedicated Main Street volunteers, Llano Main Street program has achieved some major successes with more sweat equity and determination than cash.

We were also blessed with some significant building ownership changes, where the timing was fortuitous. In addition, other building owners whose buildings needed repairs and/or facelifts for years decided to make improvements without seeking façade grant funding from the Main Street program.

Perhaps the most ambitious and significant project the Llano Main Street volunteers undertook was the restoration of Llano's 1927 Lantex Theater. The 90-year-old Spanish Colonial/art deco era building



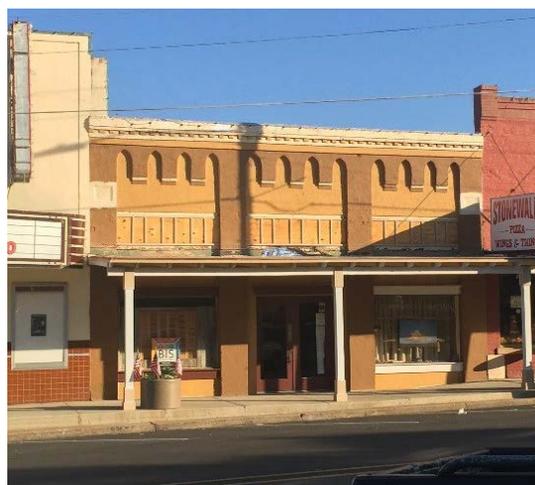
(Top) The 90-year-old Lantex Theater before restoration, showing the shabby floor, 60-year-old seats, and architectural features masked by dark, dull paint. (Middle) Main Street volunteers busy restoring the Lantex. (Bottom) The Lantex auditorium with new seats, floor, art deco painted features, and pendant lights.

served as the cultural and social focal point of downtown, and it holds 400 patrons—more than any other building in the historic district, including the courthouse. The Lantex is a city-owned facility, and the city pays a part-time manager to operate the movies, change the marquee, and manage the concession merchandise. Otherwise, the Main Street board and volunteers staff the concessions during events, and split the profits evenly with the city. Without this volunteer participation, the Lantex would no doubt struggle to remain open and continue to serve the community.

We call this our “popcorn money,” and use the funds for projects and promotions; we often use these funds to make improvements to the Lantex that the city cannot supply. The city also designates funds for facility maintenance and improvements, but the popcorn money is used for improvements and additions beyond just the regular maintenance and repair. Without any major grants, the volunteers embarked upon a systematic plan to restore the theater to its former heyday sparkle. The Lantex was never an elaborately decorated theater like some in larger cities, and its compact lobby did not allow much either. However, the distinctive art deco elements in the lobby and auditorium had been all but obscured over the decades as they had been painted over, cluttered with signage and equipment, and additions not complementary to its art deco design.

Last year, a Texas Department of Agriculture Capital Fund grant, with matching funds from the city, repaved the crumbling and non-ADA accessible sidewalks on the north side of the courthouse square along Main Street. The Main Street Manager worked with TXDOT and the TDA to replicate, as much as feasible, a historic look to the sidewalks, including a rock salt surface, concrete dye, and scoring to resemble the original 5' x 5' sections, some of which had been built as early as the 1890s with the latest in the 1920s. The original granite curbing was also retained, which helped to maintain the historic look to the street.

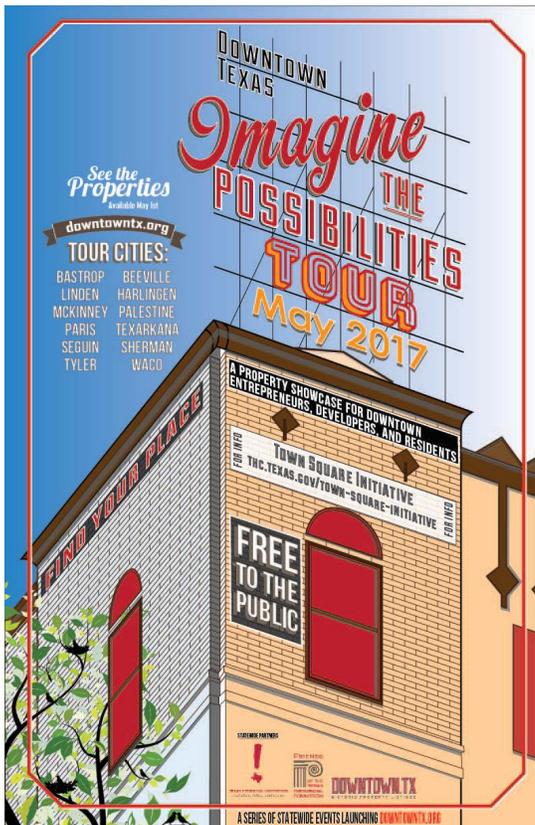
Llano's majority aging population on fixed incomes, limited hotel rooms (from which hotel tax monies would be generated), and lack of major employers limit the city's ability to fund much more than the basics of the Main Street Manager's salary. This makes our board and small corps of dedicated volunteers even more important to the projects we undertake, and the preservation efforts we have identified for action. With these limited resources and challenges, Llano has nevertheless made tremendous progress in not only physical preservation efforts, but in a preservation mindset among its citizens. Any plans these days to raze historic buildings for a highway expansion would be met with near-universal and strong opposition. We are working hard in Llano to tell the real stories of the real people and places that are represented by our surviving architectural heritage. Come visit us and see for yourself!



(Left) Llano's 1895 granite block "Red Top Jail" seen here as the backdrop to a Wild West Weekend festival skit, is 85% restored. (Middle) Two buildings on the square are getting restored with the help of Main Street façade grants, and volunteer painting and carpentry by the Main Street volunteers. Note: The brick buildings had been painted numerous times. These colors were matched to the original brick colors and patterns. Both await funding to replace their Meskers metal cornices. (Right) The former ACME Café building benefitted from the Main Street Façade Grant program and volunteer labor from the Main Street volunteers.

IMAGINE THE POSSIBILITIES TOURS

Twelve Texas Main Street cities helped celebrate and promote the launch of DowntownTX.org by hosting local Imagine the Possibilities tours. The tours showcased available downtown properties as a way to engage potential investors, entrepreneurs, developers, residents, and anyone else who has imagined themselves running a business, owning a building, or living downtown. Selected properties featured on each city's DowntownTX.org page were open and accessible to the public, and tour attendees were able to obtain additional information on downtown development and business resources at a central gathering point. Cities participating included Bastrop, Beeville, Harlingen, Linden, McKinney, Palestine, Paris, Seguin, Sherman, Texarkana, Tyler, and Waco. The following are some photo highlights from tours early in the month.



Bastrop



Palestine



Paris



Texarkana



Waco



SPECIAL VOLUNTEERS

We continue to spotlight in each edition of *Main Street Matters* those volunteers whose contributions and dedication are important to the success of local programs. If you would like to honor a special volunteer with a spotlight, please send a short narrative and image to sarah.marshall@thc.texas.gov.

David Barnett, Ennis Main Street Program

David Barnett has truly been a blessing to the Ennis Main Street program and the Ennis Farmers Market. As a volunteer, David has put in countless hours at the

farmers' market and many other downtown events. He has become someone that our program relies upon for many things. His involvement in the farmers' market includes setting up at 5 a.m., working the sound system, selling t-shirts, and breaking everything down at 1 p.m. David goes above and beyond to help customers, including carrying purchases to patrons' cars. He also recently hosted a special Make It at the Market craft for children. He is always quick to get involved in other downtown events, such as movie night where he uses his handyman skills to help with set-up.

David moved to Ennis four years ago and quickly developed a routine of riding his bike to the Ennis Farmers Market every Saturday. When he met Becky McCarty, who was the farmers' market coordinator at the time, he immediately knew he wanted to start contributing his time to help with the market he had grown to love.

Between balancing a full-time job and volunteering, David also finds time to work on computers and build birdhouses out of wood. David's smile, positive attitude, and willingness to help with anything and everything has made him a vital asset to our Ennis Main Street Program.



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT - SAN ANGELO

Main Street Managers and Board members: Please contact the state office or check the listserv for the registration link for Texas Main Street Summer 2017 training and professional development June 13-16 in San Angelo. Jon Schallert's workshop will be held on June 15.

CALENDAR

THURSDAY 6.8

- Denton: Twilight Tunes (6:30-8 p.m.)
- Rockwall: Night Owls Late Till 8! (5-8 p.m.)

FRIDAY 6.9

- Canton: Downtown Movie Series (8:30-11 p.m.)
- La Grange: Live Music & Summer Movie Nights on the Square (7-11 p.m.)

FRIDAY 6.10

- Ennis: Unity1 Summer Music Fest "Blues on Main" (6-10 p.m.)
- Hillsboro: Summer Outdoor Movie Series (8:30-11:30 p.m.)
- Waxahachie: Junk in the Trunk (9 a.m.-2 p.m.)
- Waxahachie: Trucks 'n Tunes (6-9 p.m.)

THURSDAY 6.15

- Denton: Twilight Tunes (6:30-8 p.m.)

SATURDAY 6.17

- Farmersville: Audie Murphy Day (10 a.m.-4 p.m.)
- La Grange: Aztec Dance Extravaganza (12:30-5 p.m.)
- Pilot Point: Hot Rods & Heroes Car Show (10 a.m.-2 p.m.)

THURSDAY 6.22

- Denton: Twilight Tunes (6:30-8 p.m.)
- Elgin: Western Days Festival (6-11 p.m.)
- Levelland: 1st Annual Levelland Sip & Swirl (6-10 p.m.)

THURSDAY 6.23

- Elgin: Western Days Festival (8 p.m.-12 a.m.)
- La Grange: Live Music & Summer Movie Nights on the Square (7-11 p.m.)

FRIDAY 6.24

- Elgin: Western Days Festival (10 a.m.-6 p.m.)
- Georgetown: Live Music at Georgetown Winery (5-8 p.m.)

THURSDAY 6.29

- Denton: Twilight Tunes (6:30-8 p.m.)

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



In early May, TMSP staff conducted its resource team for Buda (top images), a 2017 Main Street community. The THC's Certified Local Government staff also participated on the team, along with Sarah O'Brien, Bastrop Main Street manager, and Shawn Kirkpatrick, Bastrop EDC Executive Director. (Bottom images) Sarah Marshall recently conducted a social media training in Rosenberg, where over 40 people were in attendance.

Websites of Interest

- **Advisory Council on Historic Preservation:** www.achp.gov
- **African American Heritage Preservation Foundation:** www.aahpfdn.org
- **(The) Alliance for Historic Landscape Preservation:** www.ahlp.org
- **(The) American Institute of Architects:** www.aia.org
- **American Planning Association:** www.planning.org
- **American Society of Landscape Architects:** www.asla.org
- **(The) Cultural Landscape Foundation:** www.tclf.org
- **(The) Handbook of Texas Online:** www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online
- **Keep Texas Beautiful:** www.ktb.org
- **League of Historic American Theatres:** www.lhat.org
- **National Main Street Center:** www.preservationnation.org/main-street
- **National Park Service:** www.nps.gov
- **National Trust for Historic Preservation:** www.preservationnation.org
- **Partners for Sacred Places:** www.sacredplaces.org
- **Preservation Easement Trust:** www.preservationeasement.org
- **Preservation Directory.com:** www.preservationdirectory.com
- **Preservation Texas:** www.preservationtexas.org
- **Project for Public Spaces:** www.pps.org
- **Rails-to-Trails Conservancy:** www.railstotrails.org
- **Scenic America:** www.scenic.org
- **Texas Department of Agriculture:** www.TexasAgriculture.gov
- **Texas Commission on the Arts:** www.arts.texas.gov
- **Texas Downtown Association:** www.texasdowntown.org
- **Texas Folklife Resources:** www.texasfolklife.org
- **Texas Historical Commission:** www.thc.texas.gov
- **Texas Parks and Wildlife Department:** www.tpwd.texas.gov
- **Texas Rural Leadership Program:** www.trlp.org
- **Texas State Preservation Board:** www.tspb.state.tx.us
- **Urban Land Institute:** www.uli.org